

U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Alaska Peninsula and Becharof National Wildlife Refuge Complex

Planning Update for January 2000

This is the third in a series of updates on revision of the comprehensive conservation plan (CCP) for the Alaska Peninsula and Becharof National Wildlife Refuges. This update describes where we are in the process, summarizes the comments received, presents the alternatives being developed, and raises the issues of Wilderness and Wild & Scenic rivers. It also tells you what happens next, and how you can help.

What has happened since our most recent update:

Since you last heard from us, we have been working on analyzing the comments on issues you sent last spring. We then used your comments to develop different approaches to managing the refuges. Now that we have some preliminary alternatives, we want your opinions on whether or not we have a reasonable range of alternatives to consider. Page 2 summarizes your comments, and pages 3-5 describe the three preliminary alternatives we are asking you to review.

Wilderness and Wild & Scenic Rivers added to the list of planning issues:

After the last series of public meetings, the Fish and Wildlife Service clarified its policy regarding Wilderness and Wild & Scenic rivers. As a result, we have been directed to reevaluate existing recommendations for Wilderness and Wild & Scenic Rivers as part of our plan revision. This is consistent with many comments we have received as well; many people indicated that they value the refuges' wild character and favored protection of remote and sensitive areas of the refuges.

The Becharof Wilderness comprising 503,000 acres was established in 1980 by the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act. The existing wilderness recommendation, developed in the 1980's, includes 399,000 acres on the Becharof refuge and 640,000 acres on the Alaska Peninsula refuge (currently measured acreages). We would like your opinion on whether this should be revised, keeping in mind that these are just recommendations; Congress must pass a law to actually create new Wilderness.

The Wilderness Act specifies that Wilderness areas are

managed to retain their primeval character and influence. Natural systems in Wilderness are allowed to function unimpeded, except to respond to human-caused damage.

No rivers on the refuges are currently included in the Wild & Scenic River system. The two nearest rivers in the system are the Alagnak (Branch) River within Katmai National Park and the Aniakchak River within Aniakchak National Monument. Like Wilderness, rivers (or segments of rivers) on the refuge would only be added to the system by an act of Congress.

Designation as a Wild & Scenic River keeps a river in its free-flowing state and maintains the outstanding values that qualified the river for designation. The goal essentially is to protect the special values of the river and river corridor.

Proposals for you to consider are on page 5. The table on page 6 provides more information about both Wilderness and Wild & Scenic Rivers and how they would affect refuge uses.



What We Heard From You:

We received many responses to our request for comments on the planning issues. We heard from over 160 people at meetings and by mail and from both individuals and organizations in Alaska and from outside. We heard from people who attended meetings at Naknek, South Naknek, Port Heiden, Perryville, Chignik Lake, Chignik Bay, Chignik Lagoon, Pilot Point, and Egegik. We were weathered out of Ivanof Bay, but we talked with residents there by phone.

In general, people value the naturalness of the refuge, its wilderness qualities, and wildlife-related recreational opportunities. A small proportion of the people who commented felt that the values of the refuge were being threatened by crowding or overuse.

This is a summary of the written and verbal comments we received. A detailed summary of these comments will be included in the draft comprehensive conservation plan and environmental impact statement.

Issue 1. Should we limit or prohibit access in some remote or sensitive areas?

Many people favored taking some action to protect remote and sensitive areas on the refuge by either limiting the number of people or motorized access. Nearly all local and lower 48 residents favored some type of action, while other Alaska residents showed lower levels of support.

Helicopters attracted the greatest response, with many people stating that the recreational use of helicopters should be prohibited or limited.

Many felt that fish and wildlife was a higher priority than public access though access is important to many. Educating visitors about impacts is preferred to limiting use.

Issue 2. Should we take actions to respond to natural fluctuations of fish and wildlife populations? If so, what actions should we take?

People were divided on this issue with many local residents favoring some type of action while other Alaskans and non-residents were more divided on the issue. Many favored letting nature take its course. Those who favored intervention wanted us to be sure of the causes of fluctuations before taking action.

People were divided regarding predator control. A number of people specifically opposed predator control, although several said it was acceptable as a last resort

or to protect endangered species. Local residents were more supportive of predator control, especially to protect populations of animals used for subsistence.

Issue 3. Do we need to reduce conflicts among refuge users and, if so, what should we do?

Local residents and non-Alaskans were more likely to favor intervention, and limiting use when needed, than were non-local Alaskans. Many people felt that we should increase our monitoring of places where there was potential for crowding or conflicts to occur. Generally, respondents gave a higher priority to local and subsistence users than to guided or non-resident visitors. Some people noted the importance of keeping the refuge open to non-local use. Local residents provided examples of conflicts between recreational and subsistence users.

4. How should we work with the State and private landowners to address how activities on adjacent lands and inholdings affect refuge lands, resources, and users?

Generally, people felt that communication and educational efforts should be used to prevent off-refuge development from adversely affecting the refuge and its uses. Respondents were divided as to the issue of whether the refuge should work towards acquiring title to, or easements on, inholdings from willing landowners. Some people suggested that agreements with landowners and developing joint projects would establish a good working relationship. A number of people believed that working with the State and its controlled use area policies could be effective.

5. What additional information do we need to improve management of refuge resources, and what information should have the highest priority?

People had a diversity of opinions about information collection, some favored a focus on ecosystem function, others emphasized a need to address current issues, or visitor impacts. In general, people appeared highly supportive of this role of refuge staff and of making informed decisions about refuge management. Local residents suggested we take advantage of local knowledge and supported close monitoring of subsistence species and predators.



Where we are now:

When we analyzed the comments about issues facing the refuges, we found that current management works well for most activities and needs of the refuge at this time. That is not to say that we don't have room to improve, but that the current comprehensive management plan needs to be revised only in a few key areas.

We need your help in deciding how to best address several issues:

- * which areas and rivers, if any, we should recommend for Wilderness or Wild & Scenic River designation;
- * how and where we should more intensively monitor and manage recreational use of the refuge;
- * to what extent should use of helicopters for recreational purposes be limited or prohibited on the refuge;
- * when there is biological justification to reduce predators to help other species, how should the refuge allow such actions to occur.

So far we have developed two possible alternative approaches for managing the refuge over the next 10-15 years. Continuing the current management direction is also an option, so we have three alternatives for you to review.

Before discussing the options, we'll summarize the existing management. We'll begin with a review of the five **management categories**, or zones, ranging from intensive management to designated Wilderness, that are used to manage refuges in Alaska.

The following table provides a brief description of the management categories. A full description of these categories will be included in the draft comprehensive conservation plan and environmental impact statement.

Management Category	Management Approach
Intensive	The presence of human intervention may be very apparent. Generally applied to small areas for specific purposes (such as for Visitor centers).
Moderate	Focuses on maintaining, restoring or enhancing habitats to maintain healthy populations. Activities may result in changes to the natural environment but do not disrupt natural processes.
Minimal	Designed to maintain the environment with very little evidence of human caused change. Human activities are managed to minimize disturbance to habitats and resources.
Wild & Scenic Rivers	Emphasis is on maintaining the natural function of the river system and on protecting the qualities for which the river was included in the National system (see earlier discussion for more information).
Wilderness	Applies to areas designated by Congress as part of the National Wilderness Preservation System (see earlier discussion for more information).

Alternative 1: Continue current management

The management direction of the Alaska Peninsula/Becharof refuge complex is to preserve fish and wildlife values and their natural diversity by placing most of the lands outside of the Becharof Wilderness Area in the minimal management category.

The Becharof Wilderness comprising 503,000 acres was established in 1980 by ANILCA. An additional 399,000 acres of the Becharof Refuge and 640,000 of the Alaska Peninsula Refuge have been recommended for designation as wilderness in past plans. Congress has yet to act on these proposals so these lands are managed under the minimal management category.

Under the current management direction there are no proposed or designated Wild & Scenic Rivers.

Management Categories Used on Alaska Refuges

Fish and Wildlife Management: Fish and wildlife populations are managed in their natural diversity. This concept recognizes that populations have natural cycles. The State Board of Game and the Federal Subsistence Board adjust harvest levels in response to population changes. The Service established minimum population levels for brown bear, caribou, moose, tundra swan and sockeye salmon.

Predator control is not allowed on the Becharof Refuge. It may be allowed on the Alaska Peninsula Refuge under certain circumstances to favor or protect select wildlife species.

Recreational Opportunities. One refuge objective is to maintain access to all areas of the refuges for subsistence, recreation, and commercial users to the maximum extent possible consistent with refuge purposes. The emphasis for recreational users is to provide opportunities for short-term, low-density natural resource-oriented recreation.

The number of air taxi and sport fishing guides operating on the refuge is not limited. The number of sport hunting guides is limited and is allocated based upon Alaska regional policy.

Baseline public use monitoring has been conducted at sites where crowding or conflicts have been reported or are likely to occur, but site-specific management objectives have not been developed. Conflicts between user groups are addressed through increased education.

Helicopter landings for recreational access are not allowed inside the designated Wilderness. Outside of the Wilderness helicopter landings require special use permits that are considered on a case by case basis. To date, the refuge has not issued any permits for recreational helicopter landings.

Alternative 2:

The basic management direction of the refuge would not change. Most of the land outside of the Becharof Wilderness Area would be in the Minimal Management Category. The following management approaches would be taken for fish and wildlife management and recreation opportunities.

Fish and Wildlife Management. The minimum population levels identified under current management would no longer be considered. Wildlife populations on the refuge are within their natural levels and natural fluctuations are expected. Population objectives in use by the State would be considered while monitoring population trends. Normal population management activities (state and federal board harvest regulations) and environmental education would be the primary tools

for responding to population fluctuations.

We would fully implement the wildlife inventory plan. This would include studying the relationships between habitat and key wildlife species, population dynamics and estimates, predator-prey relationships, defining sensitive areas, developing habitat maps, and continuing studies of reproduction, survival and condition.

Predator control would be permitted only if ecologically sound and biologically justified, and only after other alternatives had been found impractical. The least obtrusive methods would be used. We also would work more closely with local residents to increase harvest of predator species under existing seasons and bag limits.

Recreational Opportunities. Our goal would shift from providing the maximum extent possible of public use to providing opportunities for wildlife-dependent activities (hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing, photography, environmental education, interpretation) that are appropriate and compatible with refuge purposes.

We would increase our monitoring of recreational use and its effects allowing us to know when further action is needed to protect refuge resources, subsistence opportunities, and compatible recreational activities. We would monitor, or study, social and biological conditions at various locations on the refuge, and talk to recreational visitors and subsistence users to help us determine how to maintain desirable conditions. The response sheet included in this update asks for your advice on what aspects of use we should monitor, and at what locations.

Based on the monitoring results, we could identify standards levels of indicators that should not be exceeded for different sites. If monitoring shows that conditions are reaching the standards we would consider taking actions at sites and times when resources, desirable conditions, or opportunities were at risk. Actions could include special conditions on commercial permits, increased education of visitors, voluntary agreement with site guidelines, increased regulations, or limits on visitor numbers at certain times or locations. We would not impose further limits on use levels without discussion with affected groups and an evaluation of options to address the identified problems.

The use of helicopters for recreational purposes would remain prohibited in the Becharof Wilderness area. For other areas of the refuge, the majority of remote or sensitive areas would be closed to recreational helicopter access. Outside of those areas, proposals would be considered on a case by case basis.

This table summarizes the main differences among the three alternatives we are considering. Remember, we anticipate changing these alternatives based on your comments!

	Current management (Alternative 1)	Alternative 2	Alternative 3
fish and wildlife management	existing wildlife inventory plan not fully implemented	increase our knowledge of wildlife and habitat needs and relationships through increased monitoring and research	same as Alternative 2
predator control	not allowed on Becharof, may be allowed on AK Peninsula refuge	would be allowed if best and least obtrusive management tool	no predator control programs would be allowed
public use monitoring and management	study of public use is reactive; no objectives for specific sites have been established	public use monitoring program would be created, and management objectives established as needed based on results.	same as Alternative 2
helicopter landings for recreational access - <u>outside of designated Wilderness areas</u>	may be allowed outside of Wilderness on case by case basis	would not be allowed in a majority of sensitive or remote areas, may be considered on other areas	would not be allowed

Alternative 3:

Alternative 3 is identical to Alternative 2 except for the following actions.

Fish and Wildlife Management. Predator control would not be allowed on the refuges.

Recreational Opportunities. Helicopter landings for recreational purposes would not be allowed on any portion of the refuges.

Adding Wilderness and Wild & Scenic River recommendations to the alternatives:

We need to decide how to incorporate possible Wilderness or Wild & Scenic River recommendations into Alternatives 2 and 3. So far, we have developed three options regarding Wild & Scenic Rivers:

1. No rivers would be recommended.
2. We could recommend one or two rivers--the Agripina and/or a portion of the King Salmon (Ugashik Unit) --for inclusion in the Wild & Scenic River System. We feel that these are outstanding examples of Alaskan rivers and that designation would help protect their free flowing condition and values.

3. We could recommend other rivers as suggested by the public.

We developed five options regarding designated Wilderness:

1. Recommend that no additional wilderness be added.
2. Leave the proposal as it is, a recommendation for the addition of 1,057,772 acres of wilderness.
3. Recommend most lands in the Ugashik unit and many lands in the Chignik unit. This would recommend the addition of 2,058,728 acres of wilderness but would not include proposed transportation corridors.
4. Recommend most refuge lands except a few areas that would provide less opportunity for solitude and have lower scenic values. This would recommend the addition of 2,836,877 acres of wilderness.
5. Recommend all lands within the refuge boundaries except conveyed lands. This would recommend the addition of 3,328,395 acres of wilderness.

What Does Wilderness and Wild & Scenic River Designation mean to users on the refuge?

How would designation affect subsistence uses and hunting, fishing, and other activities?

Subsistence use, traditional access, hunting, fishing and other recreation, and traditional commercial activities (including guiding and outfitting) would be allowed to continue but use of some mechanized equipment could be restricted. For example, local residents engaged in subsistence activities may use chainsaws (but not other motorized and mechanized equipment not related to transportation, such as generators and water pumps).

All existing subsistence and recreational uses would continue as before. Recreational use could be limited or additional regulations imposed in the future if the river corridor's values were being damaged or were at risk.

What would the effects be on motorized public uses?

Airplanes, snowmobiles, and motorboats are generally allowed in Wilderness in Alaska. Motorized and mechanized equipment is allowed for several purposes: access for subsistence; access for traditional activities and to and from villages and homesites; and access to State or privately owned lands (including subsurface rights).

There are no special provisions regulating use of motors; existing patterns of motorized uses would continue.

What activities would not be allowed?

Activities which would alter the wilderness character of the area are not allowed. Examples are large scale developments, oil, gas, and other mineral development, and most surface disturbing activities. Rights of way for roads or utilities would be difficult to obtain, but allowed.

Activities which would alter the free-flowing character of the river, such as dams or diversions. Other activities could be regulated. If the river is classified as Wild then mining would not be allowed in the river corridor.

How would state and private lands be affected if they lie within the designated areas?

State and private lands would not be affected by a wilderness designation. Access would still be assured.

Management of state and private lands is not subject to provisions of the Wild & Scenic Rivers Act.

How are areas recommended for designation managed until Congress acts?

Areas recommended for Wilderness would be managed the same as the other refuge lands in the area. Management would not change unless Congress passed an act designating the proposed areas as Wilderness.

They would be managed to maintain their free-flowing character and to maintain their outstanding values.

What lands or waters qualify to even be considered for possible designation?

In general, the area must be affected primarily by the forces of nature, and provide opportunities for solitude. All of the refuge qualifies, although some areas meet these criteria better than others. For example, areas where motorized subsistence use occurs would have fewer opportunities for solitude.

The river or segment must be free flowing and have one or more outstanding values or opportunities. Most refuge rivers meet these criteria, but a few stand out: the Agripina, Dog Salmon, King Salmon (both the Ugashik and Egegik tributaries), Ugashik Narrows, Meshik, Egegik, and Ruth rivers, Ugashik Narrows and Big Creek.

What happens next:

Once we receive your comments, we will finalize a range of alternatives to consider for the draft comprehensive conservation plan and environmental impact statement. We will assess the environmental effects that would result from implementing each alternative. When we send you the draft plan and EIS next fall we will ask for your input on the alternatives again. Typically, the management direction that is eventually chosen is some combination of those presented in the Draft EIS, modified by comments from the public.

What you can do to help:

We would like to get your suggestions on creating alternatives. The enclosed work sheet can help you focus your responses but you can respond any way you choose. To be most helpful please try and return your comments to us by March 1, 2000. If you miss that date, please respond anyway because we want to hear from you and will do our best to consider your comments whenever they arrive. We will hold meetings in the local communities in January and early February. Please attend if you are in town!

How to contact us:

In addition to sending in the enclosed work sheet, you can contact the planning team leader or refuge manager with comments or questions. You can reach us by email at:

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The Schedule:

We intend to have the Draft plan and Environmental Impact Statement out to you for review in the fall of 2000, and the Final Plan completed by early summer 2001.



The Timeline



Identify issues

What should we consider?

Develop and analyze alternatives (we are here now) *What are some different ways of acting on the issues?*

Choose alternative

Which is our preference at this point?

Publish Draft plan

Public is asked to review and comment.

Publish Final plan

Another chance for the public to see and comment.

Publish Record of Decision

The Fish and Wildlife Service publishes its final decision.



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National Wildlife Refuge Complex**

Planning Update for January 2000

This is the third planning update on revision of the comprehensive conservation plan for Alaska Peninsula and Becharof National Wildlife Refuges.

This update describes some preliminary management directions being considered, and asks for your help in evaluating and revising them.

The Fish and Wildlife Service:

Part of the Department of the Interior, the Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing the nation's fish and wildlife populations and their habitats for the benefit of people. It has responsibility for migratory birds and fish, endangered species, and certain marine mammals. The Fish and Wildlife Service also manages the National Wildlife Refuge System, the world's largest collection of lands set aside specifically for protection of fish and wildlife populations and habitats. Today there are over 500 refuges spread from Alaska to Puerto Rico, from Maine to Hawaii. Varying in size from a half acre to thousands of square miles, they include over 90 million acres of the nation's best wildlife habitat. The vast majority of these lands are in Alaska.

**Alaska Peninsula and Becharof National Wildlife Refuges
Plan Revision Response Sheet, January 2000**

The January 2000 update asks for comments on a number of issues facing the refuges. You may use this response sheet to comment if you choose. To be most useful to us, please respond by March 1, 2000. Thanks for your help!

1. The update describes three preliminary alternatives--different approaches we could take to managing the refuges over the next 10-15 years (one of the three is the existing management direction). Do you have any suggestions for changes to any of the alternatives and how they address issues facing the refuges?

2. The update describes five possible recommendations regarding additional Wilderness on the refuges. Do you have ideas or preferences about the Wilderness recommendations, or how they should be incorporated into the management alternatives?

3. The update describes three possible recommendations for designating Wild & Scenic Rivers on the refuges. Do you have any ideas or preferences about the Wild & Scenic River recommendations, or how they should be incorporated into the management alternatives?

4. Alternatives 2 and 3 would increase our monitoring of public uses, to identify issues and concerns (such as crowding, conflicts, or impacts to the resource) associated with public use before they become big problems. Do you have any suggestions on what **locations** on the refuge, or what **aspects** of public use or resource impacts, we should study?

Do you have any other comments?

Please fold on the lines, tape, and mail

The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is: to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.
(Refuge Improvement Act, 1997)



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